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BOCES voting plan sparks a controversy

Legislators protest sole polling site, cost of proposal

*By Emily Stewart
Poughkeepsie Journal*

Local legislators are calling for a delay in voting on a \$30.3 million Dutchess County Board of Cooperative Educational Services expansion plan, likening it to "backdoor borrowing."

The borrowed funds would be used to construct a 66,500-square-foot school building and other additions, which would bring BOCES programs together onto one site, and save taxpayers money in the long run, according to BOCES officials. Each Dutchess public school district and, in turn, the taxpayers in those districts would be required to contribute to pay back the loan.

But state Sens. Steve Saland, R-Poughkeepsie, and Vincent Leibell, R-Patterson, and Assemblymen Joel Miller, R-Poughkeepsie, and Marc Molinaro, R-Red Hook, are taking issue with the economic timing of the project and the decision to hold the vote at only one polling location.

Saland, Miller and Molinaro said they hadn't heard about the proposal until the Poughkeepsie Journal ran an article about it on Sunday.

On Tuesday, Saland's office mailed BOCES Superintendent John Pennoyer a letter signed by the four legislators.

"After being made aware of the Dutchess BOCES proposal to present voters a \$30.3 million bond ... concerns have emerged regarding not only the expense involved, but also the selection of a single polling place," according to the letter.

"A single polling place for nearly 200,000 potential county voters leaves much to be desired. Many people, whether it is for personal or employment reasons, will not be able to travel the distance to vote on February 10. ... Many county voters are not even aware of the bond vote or its impact on their tax bills," the letter reads.

The letter continued that, "Give these concerns, we respectfully request that the Dutchess BOCES Board withdraw this proposition on February 10th or at the very least, delay the vote in order to better inform the voting public."

Pennoyer said he was planning to forward the letter to BOCES Board of Education President Christopher Como, but that as of Friday the vote would be held as scheduled on Feb. 10.

Pennoyer said it was unrealistic to expect that nearly 200,000 people would come to the polls, given low voter turnout in the past.

Saland said voter turnout would certainly be larger if voting was held in the individual school districts instead of at one location.

"One polling place means that you don't expect anyone to come out," Miller said. "They elected to do this by keeping it under the radar."

"I think BOCES owes it to the public to do this in a more open and transparent manner," Miller said.

Molinaro said several school superintendents had told him they hadn't heard BOCES was having a

vote.

BOCES officials said the proposed project at the vocational education site on Salt Point Turnpike in the Town of Hyde Park would ultimately save the county's 13 school districts thousands of dollars each per year in the long run and cost most taxpayers less than a dollar per year more in their tax bills for the next two decades. They say that even with paying for the 20-year loan, \$1.43 million will be saved by not having to rent facilities, as they currently do, or pay for renovations to maintain current buildings.

The added cost to the district tax levies for the first year of the pay-back period would range from a low of \$2,276 in the Webutuck Central School District to a high of \$27,660 in the Wappingers Central School District. By comparison, the amounts raised in property taxes in Webutuck for 2008-09 was \$11.53 million, the lowest in the county, and Wappingers' tax levy was \$113.22 million, the highest.

For homeowners in all 13 school districts, paying back the debt would have a minimal effect on their school property tax bill, said Linda Poleski, BOCES assistant superintendent for business services. For a homeowner with a \$5,000 annual school tax bill, less than a dollar more per year would go toward paying back the debt on the BOCES capital project. The added cost would range - depending on the school district - from a low of 72 cents in the Pawling Central School District to \$1.22 in Wappingers.

Miller and Molinaro said it would make more sense to hold the vote in May, when people would already be at the polls for the school budgets.

"But they may be afraid to include it with the other votes because it might fail," Miller said.

Pennoyer said he would try to deal with the issue "post haste."

"If schools and school districts are about civic lessons, this certainly flies in the face of what civics is supposed to be," Saland said.

Additional Facts

Polling site

All registered voters in Dutchess County can vote on borrowing \$30.3 million for the Dutchess BOCES Centralized Campus Project from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. Feb. 10. There is one polling place at the Dutchess BOCES BETA site at 900 Dutchess Turnpike (Route 44) in the Town of Poughkeepsie.

For more information on the project and absentee ballot application, call 845-486-4800 or visit www.dcboces.org
